

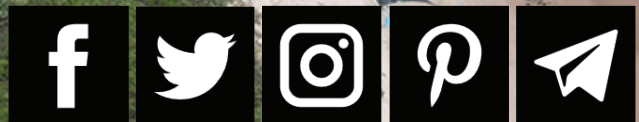
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“Your Pro-RGV News”

RGV Represents!

By Daniel Silva

The Rio Grande Valley (RGV) Partnership made waves in Washington by taking a delegation from the RGV to advocate for water resources, infrastructure, education, healthcare, border security and economic growth. Agencies, key committee chairs, and members of the House of Representatives and the Senate gave uninterrupted time to listen to the Valley’s delegation as it related to our legislative priorities.

Taking the advocacy trip in such great numbers gave power to the voice of the Rio Grande Valley. Together, the RGV’S unified voice – One Region, One Voice – drives progress and promises a brighter tomorrow. President and CEO Daniel Silva said, “Our representatives in D.C. listened to our message and provided important insight on issues such as water, transportation and infrastructure. This trip proved to be valuable to those who dedicated their time to the visit.”



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Isla Blanca Ranks As Top Beach

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The road to Isla Blanca Park being named USA Today's Best Beach in Texas for 2024 began decades before when the South Padre Island park's old pavilion featured a lean-to metal roof and an open view to the Gulf of Mexico.

Isla Blanca Park for decades was the place for Rio Grande Valley families to gather with homestyle picnics. The venue provided a fun and inexpensive getaway.

The amenities were no-frills. The old pavilion was a basic one with picnic tables arranged in neat rows. Children streamed out from the open-air pavilion to splash in the surf. The jetties were a short walk away

for fishing in the sea. It was a simple but wonderful pleasure that opened up the vista of the Gulf of Mexico to working-class families.

Isla Blanca today is a vastly different place from the park's early years of the 1950s and 1960s. Cameron County in recent years has invested \$30 million to upgrade facilities. There are new pavilions, boardwalks, cabanas and an amphitheater. Then there is the star attraction – the beach. Joe Vega, the county's parks director, hails "the one mile of pristine beach" of Isla Blanca's shoreline.

Put it all together and USA Today has rated Isla Blanca Park as the Best Beach in Texas for 2024.

"It's a great feeling to be ranked No. 1," Vega said. "It's like we say, Isla Blanca Park is the crown jewel of the Texas Gulf Coast."

Moving Ahead

Joining Isla Blanca on the list of top Texas beaches is the nearby Boca Chica Beach, which in recent times has gained fame as being the staging ground for SpaceX's Starship rockets.

Boca Chica is not under the county's parks department management and ranks third among Texas beaches on the national newspaper's list. Of the top beach – the one at Isla Blanca – USA Today says it



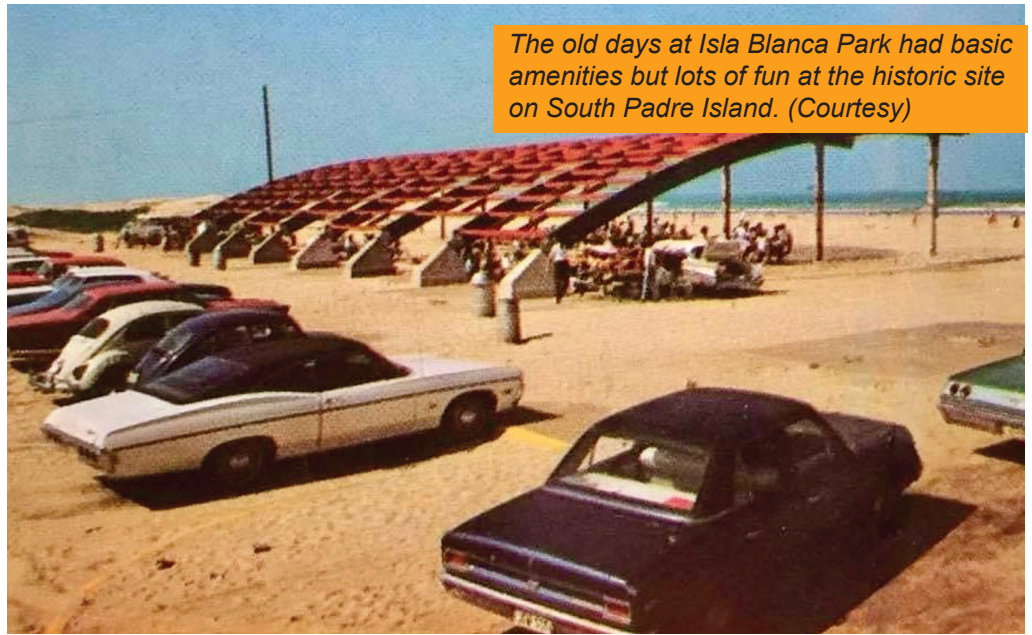
Improvements to Isla Blanca's infrastructure have helped it to rank as the top beach in Texas. (Courtesy)

“enhances visitors with its soft white sands, turquoise water and vibrant beach culture.” The newspaper also praised Isla Blanca’s “abundance of opportunities for fun, with beachfront pavilions, and rental amenities easily accessed.”

Those opportunities and amenities include:

- Two new pavilions.
- Boardwalks that connect the seaside structures to the beaches.
- New cabanas and improved restrooms.
- An amphitheater and events center.
- A sand nourishment and dune restoration system that adds to the beach’s beauty and shores up coastal protections against storms.

“It’s a whole array of amenities,” Vega said. “These investments and the improvements



The old days at Isla Blanca Park had basic amenities but lots of fun at the historic site on South Padre Island. (Courtesy)



A new complex of pavilions and boardwalks have attracted beachgoers from across the state and nation to USA Today’s best beach in Texas. (Courtesy)

we've put in at Isla Blanca Park are for the generations to come to enjoy in the years ahead."

Front Row Seat

Adding to all of those amenities is the big rocket within easy view across the bay from Isla Blanca.

USA Today's beach rankings were published just days before SpaceX's most recent Starship launch from its base at Boca Chica Beach. The early June "integrated flight tests 4," as SpaceX described it, lifted off flawlessly as thousands viewed across the Laguna Madre at Isla Blanca.

"We have the front row seat to SpaceX," Vega likes to say.

The fourth Starship launch was its most successful from its beginning to the very end when the ship fired its landing burn engines and appeared to make a successful splashdown a world away in the Indian Ocean. And it all started in Boca Chica with thousands looking on at Isla Blanca. Vega opens the park at 3 a.m. on launch days to accommodate crowds gathering to see the rockets fire up.

Vega's "crown jewel" and its close-up views of rocket launchings will become a staple. SpaceX says those events will become more frequent with plans accelerating for Starship to reach the moon. The ultimate goal is Mars.

"The visibility exposure we've gotten from SpaceX has been tremendous," Vega said. "Every launch brings big crowds."

It has become just another reason to visit the best beach in Texas. The USA Today best beaches in Texas list had Rockport Beach coming in second, with three Corpus Christi-area beaches and those in Port Aransas and Galveston rounding out the top 10 list. Isla Blanca and Boca ranked first and third, respectively.



The \$30 million in investments at Isla Blanca Park are one reason it was recently named the best beach in Texas. (Courtesy)



"The one mile of pristine beach" is among the top attractions at Isla Blanca Park. (Courtesy)

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Edinburg Celebrates All-America Honor

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Edinburg's legacy of civic engagement and improvement reached another milestone recently as the fast-growing community was named an All-America City for the fourth time in its history.

The award, as given by the National Civic League, celebrates communities that exemplify the best projects and achievements in innovation, civic engagement and collaboration. The organization chose Edinburg as one of 20 finalists this year from a pool of several hundred applicant cities from across the country. In early June, a delegation of about two dozen residents and city staffers led by Edinburg Mayor Ramiro Garza Jr. traveled to Denver to make their group presentation to National Civic League judges.

The Edinburg delegation's pitch to the committee of judges featured the city's offerings of year-round festivals, the creation of inclusive parks and a long-range 2040 plan

looking to the future. The committee was impressed. Judges lauded Edinburg for being "steadfast in its commitment to fostering community growth and development," while providing a cross-section of city residents and businesses with "exceptional opportunities."

For Edinburg, the 2024 award adds to the All-America City designations of 1968, 1995 and 2000.

"We came here and showed it on a national stage," Mayor Garza said from Denver in a video provided by the City of Edinburg. "The competition was about civic engagement. We were able to show what our residents are doing in the community and we're getting recognized for it."

Compelling Stories

Other Rio Grande Valley cities have received similar recognition over the years.

Brownsville has been an All-America

City twice. The other All-America cities in the Valley are Hidalgo, Pharr, Harlingen, Mission and Weslaco, with each one of those communities winning the prestigious honor once in recent decades.

Edinburg's fourth All-America City designation comes at a time when the community is experiencing the most rapid rate of growth in its history. The city ranks as the 12th fastest growing community in the country for cities with populations of over 100,000 residents. The city's economic development corporation cites figures of \$400 million in construction value over the last year and 4,500 residential lots under current development.

Those growth numbers are impressive but not solely sufficient to gain All-America City honors. There has to be stories and compelling narratives to convince National Civic League judges that a city is more than



An Edinburg delegation gathers to celebrate their city being an All-America City for the fourth time in its history. (Courtesy)

growth and economic development. Edinburg community leaders touted a Mayor’s Youth Advisory Council as how a city can encourage participation in local governance among its younger residents. The city’s series of festivals was another highlight which showed judges how Edinburg promotes cultural and musical events amid its rapid economic development.

“It doesn’t matter where you’re from, you’re going to have a festival in our city,” Mayor Garza said of the diversity of events in his city.

Engaging The Community

The community’s diversity was evident in the delegation representing Edinburg at the event in Denver.

Those traveling to Colorado included high school students, community leaders, elected officials and representatives of a local foundation dedicated to serving children. Community leaders spoke of the challenges Edinburg faces, including what they consider to be misleading national media reporting about the United States/Mexico border and lower-than-national averages for personal income.

A way to address those challenges, community leaders told the judges, were initiatives such as 2040 committees that actively involved residents from all parts of Edinburg in mapping out specific plans for the city’s future across a range of issues. It is the emphasis Edinburg has demonstrated to be inclusive and engaging with its local residents that were among the qualities that most impressed the judges, Garza said.

“Our city’s ability to bring together individuals from all walks of life to work toward common goals is truly inspiring,” the mayor said. “This award reaffirms our belief in the power of community-driven action and the importance of strong civic infrastructure.”



Edinburg Mayor Ramiro Garza Jr., center, led many presentations recently at a National Civic League conference in Denver. (Courtesy)



Edinburg city leaders and residents highlight the diversity of community efforts to make improvements in what would be selected as an All-America City. (Courtesy)



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Robotics Connects RGV Youths To Future

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Heriberto Reynoso is a high school graduate of the early 2000s and was the type of kid “building robots in my garage” when such technological skills were a bit rare among American youth.

His parents wondered what he was doing, while at school, he recalls teachers that “didn’t understand what I was asking.”

Reynoso was perhaps a bit ahead of his time at his high school in Brownsville. His technological bent grew even stronger during his college years, which included software engineering internships at NASA. Reynoso also found an entrepreneurial element amongst his varied interests when in November 2011, he founded Reybotics. The Mercedes-based robotics manufacturing company offers an educational component that delivers technology curriculum to schools. Reynoso’s company improvised out of necessity in 2020 and 2021, pivoting to the manufacturing of face shields that were in high demand at the time in hospitals.

Those years were challenging economic times. Reybotics was not allowed access to schools for classroom sessions due to widespread closures and the emphasis on remote learning. Reynoso downscaled his company’s operations and moved Reybotics to smaller quarters in Weslaco. He would expand educational offerings to schools in the Valley in connecting to STEM-related programs emphasizing science, math and engineering programs.

The commercial component has continued as well. Designing and producing prosthetic devices is one piece of what Reybotics does. Reynoso’s greatest passion, however, is evident when he speaks of reaching out to students and schools in being a mentor. He can now answer the sort of questions his high school teachers were unable to grasp years ago.

“It’s super exciting to be part of STEM curriculum in Valley schools,” he said. “It’s building up the human capital we have and helping to create more engineers and scientists. For us, the commercial funds our educational products and services.”

Reaching Students Earlier

Back in his hometown, Reynoso recounted on the Reybotics Facebook page

what it was like to connect with hundreds of schoolchildren at an hours-long session at the Children’s Museum of Brownsville.

“From virtual reality headsets that transported us to new worlds, to navigating Mars rovers to collect habitats, we soared ... and rolled into the future with spherical robots,” he wrote of the early 2024 session at the museum.

It’s all part of Reybotics’ educational offerings. Reynoso, in collaboration with area schools, has created a wide-ranging curriculum. It includes programs that

introduce learners ages 5 and younger to simple engineering vocabulary and the basics of programming. For “older learners,” ages 6 to 12, they are now ready to delve deeper into robotics and master procedural programming.

One can see just how early students can start learning in photos of Reybotics at Alpha Brownsville. It’s a STEM-oriented school for grade-school youth that draws children from SpaceX families who have relocated to work at Starbase. In the photos, kindergarten-aged children use

Heriberto Reynoso is a Brownsville native who has taken his love of technology from an early age in developing a robotics business in the Rio Grande Valley. (VBR)



tablets they have programmed to move small robots from point to point on their classroom floor.

Reynoso uses terms like “augmented reality” and being “collaborative and interactive in the digital space” to describe how children are learning today and doing so at a much earlier age than previous eras. It’s not just learning “how to design a robot from scratch,” he said. They are also learning how to program it and know something about the software that operates it.

The goal is to make such high-tech curriculum more affordable to public schools and not just the private schools. Reynoso intends to reach that goal by developing apps that will be readily accessible to more students. They could ultimately reach kids like the one who grew up in Brownsville making robots in his garage.

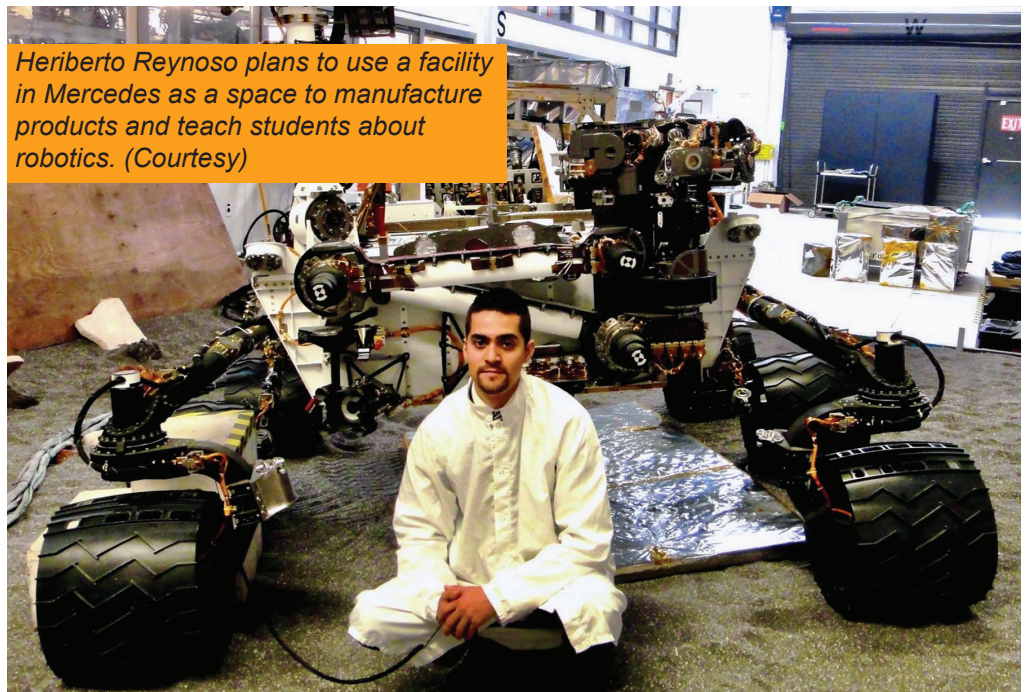
“We want to standardize this and take it to states across the nation,” he said of the systems and learning tools Reybotics is developing.

Work & Teaching Space

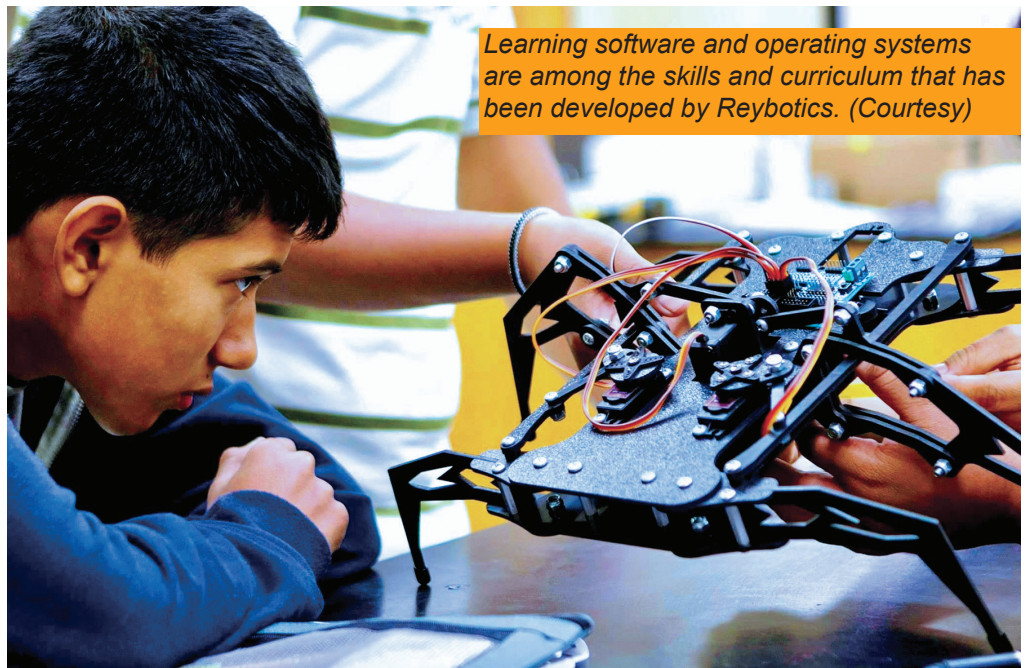
Reynoso envisions bringing his operations back to Mercedes and the city’s industrial park.

It would be a facility large enough to house the equipment and machinery needed to mass produce commercial products geared in large part to the healthcare industry. Just as importantly for Reynoso, there would be space allocated for field trips from area schools where he could hold workshops and lead tours explaining and teaching the world of robotics.

“It means a lot to me to be able to do all of this here,” he said. “I love the Valley. I’ve never wanted to be anywhere else.”



Heriberto Reynoso plans to use a facility in Mercedes as a space to manufacture products and teach students about robotics. (Courtesy)



Learning software and operating systems are among the skills and curriculum that has been developed by Reybotics. (Courtesy)

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Therapist Uses Music To Heal & Treat Patients

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Marisa de Leon was a child of music growing up, playing piano and then the viola in her high school orchestra. Music, she says, was her “safe space.”

It was during her high school years when de Leon saw a “60 Minutes” report featuring the recovery of former U.S. Rep. Gabby Giffords from a gunshot wound to the head. In early 2011, Giffords of Arizona survived an assassination attempt in her Tucson-area district but suffered severe injuries. Giffords struggled to regain her ability to speak. Part of her way back included intensive musical therapy, including singing to begin regaining the ability to form and speak words again.

A young girl in Mercedes was taking in all of this. In watching the television story, she came to an immediate realization.

“That’s it,” de Leon recalled thinking. “That’s for me. It’s what I’m going to do.”

Pursuing a Path

As the daughter of a healthcare administrator, de Leon’s destiny would be in that field with a different twist. At Texas Woman’s University in Denton, she earned degrees in the health sciences with a specialization in music therapy. De Leon went on to gain a national certification in music therapy. She then utilized that expertise to start her own business in 2017 – the Mercedes-based RGV Music Therapy and Wellness Center.

Today, de Leon and her staff of therapists work with clients from Laredo to Brownsville. They visit patient homes and also offer in-person services at the Mercedes center. De Leon’s commitment to music therapy is evident in the vibrant way she describes the impact it can have in improving the health of her clients.

“Music affects every part of who we are,” she said. “Music is woven into our identity.”

Music Reaches Everyone

The power of music is such that it can help a patient heal even after unspeakable trauma – as was the case with Giffords – or help an autistic child cope and connect.

Musical therapy can also reach patients suffering from cognitive disorders such as Alzheimer’s or dementia, and in de Leon’s words, “get them back for a moment” when

patients recall songs from their youth. A patient who is having trouble recalling the names and faces of loved ones can suddenly recall a distant memory when a song is played and they start singing the correct lyrics, word for word.

“We know music is connected to memory,” de Leon said of the patients. “It’s incredibly meaningful to watch how music takes them somewhere and they’re able to connect again with their memories.”

De Leon describes some of the key



Marisa de Leon uses music as a therapy tool to help her clients. (VBR)

elements of music therapy this way:

- Receptive: The memories and emotions of actively listening to favorite songs.
- Composing: Taking the feelings associated with music and then being creative in that art form.
- Improvising: Expressing ideas and thoughts and being inventive to make something new.
- Playing an instrument: The bodily aspects of using fingers, hands and feet to regain physical movements.

The flexibility of music is expansive. It can be cognitive, neurological, behavioral and spiritual, de Leon said.

“Music is processed through the brain,” she said. “It affects so many aspects and it can be such an accessible tool in providing therapy. Music is very welcoming and can reach anyone.”

Cultural Connection

It can also be cultural.

De Leon offers instruction and therapies that connect to the cultures and values of the Rio Grande Valley. A three-credit course offering through RGV Music Therapy is “Mexican American Values & Therapeutic Alliance in Music Therapy.”

The course as designed by de Leon helps music therapists to “understand how cultural values and social expectations” in South Texas can be used in clinical settings to help patients. It’s an important insight to know in a region where *corridos* and *cumbias* are revered in many families. It’s also a place where music from cultural icons has a lasting power.

“A day won’t go by without playing Selena’s songs,” de Leon, referencing the late artist known as the queen of Tejano



The RGV Music Therapy and Wellness Center was established in 2017 and serves clients from Laredo-to-Brownsville. (VBR)

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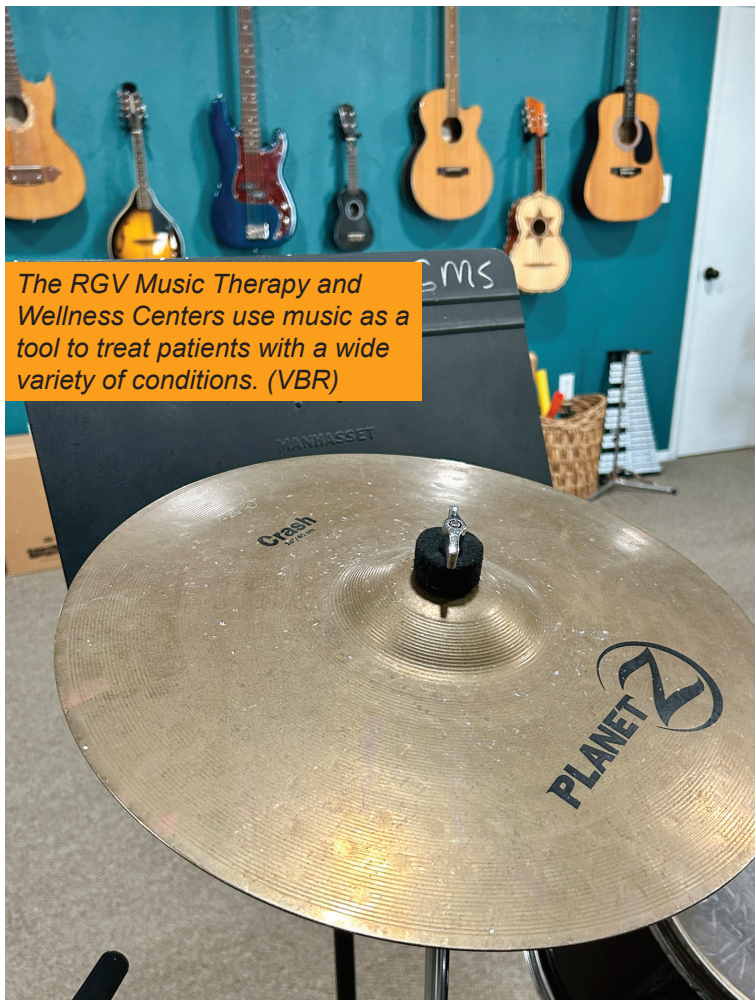
It's all a great fit personally and professionally for de Leon, who never had a doubt where she would base her practice.

"I was always coming back to the Valley," she said. "It's really important for me to be in Mercedes. This is my community and it's really special to do it from here."

Music lifts spirits and "is woven into our identity." (VBR)



Guitars are among the instruments available at the RGV Music Therapy and Wellness Center. (VBR)



The RGV Music Therapy and Wellness Centers use music as a tool to treat patients with a wide variety of conditions. (VBR)

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Apprenticeship Program Addresses Needs

By STC Public Relations

The Construction Superintendent Apprenticeship program at South Texas College gives students the opportunity to earn while they learn.

Maribel and Carolina Saenz – two sisters who operate their own utility contracting business – received a certificate of completion from STC’s apprenticeship program. The program is tailored to students already working in an industry. For the Saenz sisters, the STC certifications will help take their Saenz Utility Contractors of Edcouch-Elsa to a new level of growth.

“We jumped at the chance to take this program as soon as it was available to us,” Maribel Saenz said. “The apprenticeship program at STC became a system of checks and balances for us that allowed us to see what we are doing right and where we can improve while giving us an even greater professional edge.”

The college has established the program to be what its administrators call a “hybrid-style” course, combining hands-on training and classwork. Students can earn their certificates in four to six months with 2,000 hours of on-the-job training. Once completed, candidates then receive a Certificate of Apprenticeship from the U.S. Department of Labor.

Carolina Saenz says completion of the apprenticeship program gives her family-owned business a big boost in moving the enterprise forward.

“As women in the construction industry, our priority has always been to get more education on how to run the business more efficiently,” she said.

Covers Key Aspects

By design, the STC apprenticeship program covers essential aspects of the construction industry.

Those skills include blueprint reading, construction management and leadership. It focuses on professionals in construction-related careers who are involved in public sector projects such as federal initiatives, schools and industrial endeavors.

One of those students from the public sector was Aracely Rocha, a commercial plan examiner with the City of Edinburg. She enrolled in the apprenticeship program to grow as a person and in her professional

field.

“Being in this will allow me to get more knowledge and to get a feel for what the field in the private sector is going through,” Rocha said. “Construction is a big field and it’s an evolving field. You can’t be afraid to try something new or continue your growth in the knowledge you already possess.”

The college and its Center for Advanced Training and Apprenticeships formed a partnership with the Rio Grande Valley Chapter of Associated General Contractors of America in creating the apprenticeship program. Through contacts provided by the general contractors association, students get a first-hand look at key issues in the construction industry.

“The main support for the program is coming from the industry itself,” said Carlos Margo, who is the dean of STC’s dean for the advanced training center. “That’s what makes this strong. It’s because this is something that has been developed and is need-based and not developed in a vacuum.”

‘Fill In The Gaps’

The Saenz sisters own and operate a company of 25 employees, with Maribel saying “we’re small but mighty.”

Carolina said going through the STC program gave her a new perspective on running the family business.

“I learned things that Maribel does like



Sisters Maribel Saenz and Carolina Saenz own a utility contracting business and gained certifications from a construction apprenticeship program at South Texas College. (Courtesy)

project estimating along with the management and supervision of personnel,” she said. “She learned more of what I do, which includes things like project take-off and scheduling. This helped us come together so that we could help our business fill in the gaps and see what direction we need to grow.”

STC President Ricardo Solis said the apprenticeship is working as it was designed to do. STC is working in collaboration with industries and listening to their workforce needs.


“Finding mentors and getting a credential that you can take with you, all those elements together are a foundation for success,” Solis said. “We’re putting this at the forefront and we’re pushing the envelope. We’re solving this issue through the workforce.”





A STC instructor works with a student during classroom work as part of the college’s construction apprenticeship program. (Courtesy)



STC students proudly show the certifications they’ve earned from the U.S. Department of Labor after completing the college’s construction apprenticeship program. (Courtesy)



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Young Entrepreneur `Ruffin' It' Out

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

At age 21, Holly Hargrove had already earned a licensed vocational nursing degree to go with an associate of applied science degree in business management.

The latter came from Texas State Technical College in Harlingen. The LVN nursing degree was achieved during Hargrove's high school years at the Harlingen School of Health Professions. Hargrove has an appreciation for the healthcare field and is proud to have earned her nursing degree.

Hargrove did find, however, that it wasn't a career she wanted to pursue. The business management degree from TSTC pointed her in a new direction. She's the daughter of a veterinarian technician and grew up with a father who loves hunting dogs. Hargrove was inclined to be involved in something involving the care of animals. It's how on the western

edge of Harlingen, heading toward Primera, that Hargrove launched Ruffin' It Pet Resort.

She and her family did a fixer-it-upper. In this case, it wasn't turning the former offices of a utility electrical contractor into a residence, but instead into what Ruffin's Facebook page say is an "up and coming luxury, 24/7 pet boarding facility."

"I've always leaned toward pet care," Hargrove said. "There is a need for it in the Harlingen area."

Reading Body Language

The young entrepreneur's business is a work in progress after its recent opening.

There are still rooms being renovated for the change over from a contractor's business place to a facility caring for dogs and cats.

The front section of the new business has been

transformed into professional office space. Around the corner and down a short hallway leads to one of the dog kennels. Two very large dogs – including a Newfoundland weighing well over 100 pounds – leap to attention, with tails happily wagging in seeing Hargrove during their recent stay at Ruffin' It.

The key to understanding dogs, she says, is reading their body language and "knowing what they're going to do before they do it." Hargrove has strategies and approaches to deal with the separation anxiety many dogs experience when separated from their owners. Ruffin' It has a large backyard area where dogs can exercise and begin to feel at home in their temporary shelter until their owners return.

"Cuddle them and have activities for them to do," she said of caring for dogs.

Cats can be more of a challenge. They are

Holly Hargrove of Harlingen is a young entrepreneur who has started her own pet care and boarding business. (Courtesy)



creatures who thrive on familiarity and prone to stress in new surroundings, Hargrove said. Be it a dog or a cat, after an initial stay or two at Ruffin,' she works toward making them comfortable at her boarding home. Some customers are already convinced that Ruffin' is a safe and nurturing place for their pets.

"We've taken our 4 dogs twice, and both times have been flawless," wrote Laura Haley on the Ruffin' Facebook page. "Our dogs are very well cared for, and we get to go on vacations now!"

Give It Your All

Hargrove's time at TSTC served her well. She credits the business management courses at the college for teaching her about accounting and customer service.

"They developed my way of thinking to be a professional," Hargrove said of her TSTC instructors.

One of her instructors, Duston Brooks, told the TSTC media office that Hargrove was the type of student that wanted "to know the why." The instructor recalled the specificity of a financial plan which Hargrove came up with for a mock small business. The hypothetical is now a reality with the Ruffin' It Pet Resort. Her business is in its beginning months and off to a good start for a young entrepreneur who is sure about her mission and ambitions.

"Find out what you're good at and give it your all," she said, giving advice to her generation of high school and college graduates, while following those words in her own life.

Ruffin' It also offers grooming and training and Hargrove plans to offer daycare for pets in the near future.

Call 956-752-7833 or email ruffinitt@harlingen@gmail.com for more information about the requirements and process involved to board pets.



There's lots of cuddles and activities for dogs at the Ruffin' It Pet Resort. (VBR)



Cuddles are one key ingredient to great care at the Ruffin' It Pet Resort in Harlingen. (Courtesy)

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CELEBRATE RGV ENTREPRENEURS



RGV ★ STARTUP WEEK!

Please take a look at the numbers in the right column of this page first. Have you done that? Great. If you read about the impact of a week-long entrepreneurial celebration, you might have thought that these numbers were from events in larger cities like Austin, San Antonio, Houston, etc. However, we are proud to announce that these are the achievements from our first-ever RGV Startup Week right here in the Rio Grande Valley!

The RGV Startup Week celebrated entrepreneurship in the Rio Grande Valley and tapped into the culture of the region to promote the great things happening here. This inaugural event took place from May 3 to May 10. The festival aimed to empower aspiring entrepreneurs and business owners through educational events, interactive experiences, and actionable resources. The event was free and open to everyone and was strategically held in Brownsville due to its proximity to Mexico, its dynamic higher education community, and the revitalization of its historic downtown.

RGV Startup Week brought together and highlighted the region's entrepreneurial talent, fostering a feeling of regional unity and pride. The event featured a StartUp Texas pitch competition, a Startup Bootcamp, business workshops, and panels, and utilized the eBridge Center for Business & Commercialization's startup-focused resources to offer comprehensive support for attendees.

This is just the beginning! The RGV StartUp Week team is already preparing for next year's event. If you missed this year's event and want to catch up on the recorded panels and sessions, or if you're curious about what to expect next year, you can **visit www.rgvstartup.com**
Follow us on social media at [@argvstartup](https://twitter.com/argvstartup)

EVENT IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS

+120 Speakers & Panelists

+75 Sessions

+150 Hours of Activities

+800 Registrants

+13,500 Video Minutes Streamed

+250,000 Users Reached on Social Media

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